1: Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

2. INTERNAL ORGANIZATION: AUTHORITY AND MACHINERY OF JUSTICE

In the internal organization of Shamirpet two different units can be clearly delineated. The socio-religious organization of the village with its independent set of office-bearers and functionaries is quite distinct from the administrative organization of government and semi-government officials.

The following diagram will illustrate the internal organization of the village in socio-religious matters:

Deshmukh
(Headman of the village)

Panchayat
(Village council)

Ganadi
(Organizers of village ritual)

Kulam-pedda
(Headmen of the different castes)

Peddamanshi
or
Inti-pedda
(Head of the family)

The Deshmukh is the hereditary headman of the village. He is the richest person in the settlement and has very considerable landed property. His forefathers became the headmen of the village some three hundred years ago, and since then the family has retained the title and office. By virtue of his wealth, position and the contacts he maintains with powerful government officials, the Deshmukh is a pivotal figure in the village and enjoys a position of great influence. Although his word is no longer law, he still wields very great influence in the village and is always given a place of honour at all village ceremonies. Village disputes of any importance are always referred to him, and his decisions and wishes are seldom disregarded. However, the Deshmukh takes very few decisions on his own authority and initiative. He seeks the help of the *panchayat* which can be regarded as the central council for the village as a whole. Of course, the Deshmukh takes a prominent part in the deliberations and discussions of the *panchayat* and often guides it in such a way that his wishes in the matter are carried out.

The *panchayat* or village council consists of the headmen of

T. Base E-5 (1951-58) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

earlier in this chapter, suggests that an extrovert and sensitive people who cannot conceal their approval or disapproval and who do not suppress their immediate reactions cannot have a very peaceful and quiet life. Indeed most of the tensions are short-lived, but quarrels and conflicts are numerous and frequent. As the community is partially autonomous in several spheres of life, it is necessary for it to have an effective mechanism for the control of these conflicts.

Sharanpur, however, is only partially autonomous, for it is a part of a wider social system. The extent of caste organization is regional, and covers a very large number of villages. In several spheres of life it is the caste rather than the village that has the upper hand in controlling the behaviour of its constituents. Details of ritual connected with the life-cycle, and observance of the norms and norms of the caste fall in this category. Further the village is but a small unit in the national political structure of a sub-continent. Its laws are made by the State Legislature and the Union Parliament and the law-enforcing arm of the State extends to it as effectively as it does to the rest of the country. This brings the State police and magistracy on the scene. All important breaches of law go to the civil and criminal courts. What remains of the autonomy of the village appears quite insignificant, but in actual practice relatively few cases go to caste councils, fewer to courts of law, and left to itself to control the inter-group and inter-personal relations of its members the machinery responsible for social control and justice within the village finds itself burdened with considerable work.

How is this mechanism set in motion? How does it work? Presently I shall give a few illustrative cases which will reveal the process in certain typical situations. At this stage it is necessary to point out that all cases of conflict do not go to the village council. In many cases the parties to the dispute boisterously quarrel over the issue and there the matter ends. For a few days they probably will not be on speaking terms, leave each other out of social functions and ceremonies, and continue to indulge in mutual recriminations and behind-the-back slander; but in course of time normal relations will be resumed. In other cases mediation or arbitration of the elders may be sought or may be volunteered by the elders themselves. When influential village elders notice disorderly or unbecoming behaviour on the part of someone

Dube E-5 (1351-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

repeatedly they intervene, and seek to set things right by the pressure of their personality. They ridicule, admonish and threaten the wrongdoer, and leave it at that. This intervention is often effective and succeeds in achieving the desired result. Disputes may be specially referred to influential and impartial elders, and thus a settlement is sought without the necessity of having to appear before the village council. When these efforts fail, or when the seriousness of the offence or dispute warrants it, it is taken to the headman or to one of the elders with a specific request that it be decided by the village council. On the other hand, elders may take cognizance of a serious matter and may themselves bring it to the notice of the village council. Of course all cases of murder, serious theft, and grievous bodily injury, as well as of default in payment of substantial loans are taken to the criminal and civil courts. Abduction and adultery can be referred to law courts; but generally they are taken either to the village council or to the caste council. Misconduct with a married or unmarried woman, running away with a married woman, default in fulfilling the terms and conditions of a marriage contract may similarly be referred to either or both the caste council and the village council. Of the two, whichever happens to be more powerful and effective attracts most of these marginal cases to itself. Personal disputes, minor property and land disputes, sex offences and conflicts arising out of breach of contract generally come up for hearing and decision before the village council.

The composition of the village council has been described earlier. When cases come up for hearing before it, the proceedings are carried on with considerable dignity. Available evidence and eye-witnesses are examined. The motive for the offence, and the situation in which it was committed—particularly its immediate cause, as well as presence or absence of provocation—are also taken into account. Outwardly an attitude of objectivity and impartiality is maintained by everyone; although in reality the rival factions within the council try to tip the scale their own way so that the evidence may later be construed in such a way that it may prove advantageous to the client to whom they have already promised their support. At the time of actual decision the parties to the dispute have to withdraw, allowing the council freedom to discuss and analyse the issues involved. Divergent and often contrary opinions may be expressed by the rival factions at this stage.

I. Dose E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

But when the decision is announced, it is done so in a manner that indicates unanimity among the members. Besides attempting arbitration and mediation, the village council also administers punishment when a person's guilt is proved. The nature of punishment itself differs in different categories of cases, also on the basis of persons involved in the dispute. It ranges from a simple warning to a complete social boycott; the intermediate stages being stern admonition, firm demand for apology, compensation to the aggrieved, and fining.

Absence of internal unity within the council has undermined its authority considerably. The fact that some of its members allow and encourage their protégés to defy—fully or partially—its decisions, contributes further to its growing weakness. Dissatisfied with its judgement one can always take the case to a regular court of law where the decision of the council may be reversed.

With these preliminary observations we can now proceed to examine a few illustrative cases which represent typical situations met with in the life of the community:

1. V. R. R. and his brother B. live together. Their parents are dead, and being minor B. lives with his elder brother. V. R. R. has had elementary education. Being married into a respectable lower middle-class family in the city, and himself with some experience of urban life, V. R. R. regards himself as the leader of a band of city-influenced youth. As most of his time is spent in loafing, planning mischief, gambling, drinking and instigating people to quarrel, he cannot devote much time to the land, and consequently the financial position of the family is not satisfactory. V. R. R. adds to his income by extorting money from the villagers by offering his advice, help and support—often for unjust causes—but this money is spent almost wholly on himself. B. is now an adolescent, and is fast approaching a marriageable age. Noticing his elder brother's indifference towards him, B. approached some of the elders of his caste. His main complaints were: (*a*) V. R. R. does not spend his (B.'s) share of the land and its produce on him. (*b*) Nothing is being saved for his marriage. One day V. R. R. lost his temper over some trifling issue and scolded his younger brother. B. ran to E. D. R.—an influential man in the village, and the hereditary leader of his caste. Fearing that B. might be beaten by his elder brother, E. D. R. accompanied him to his house and asked V. R. R. to come out of the house and listen to

I: Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

him. Partly because of anger, and partly under the intoxication of his power and influence as the leader of a youth gang, he curtly remarked to E. D. R., 'Have you nothing else to do? What brings you here? Is it because of jealousy that you cannot see our welfare and prosperity and you are instigating my brother to separate from me?' This was too much even for the sedate, cool and level-headed E. D. R., who enjoys great reputation in the village for his sobriety. He lost his temper and said, 'You bastard, you seem to have developed great notions about yourself. After spending a few months in the city—and with the support of that band of rascals—you think that you can defy the authority of village elders. I shall show you what it means to be impertinent to me.' V. R. R. was still arrogant but less impolite. E. D. R. said, 'If you have the cheek to answer me back, I shall make life impossible for you in the village. You have a long tongue; but if you wag it against us we can pull it.' At this stage V. P. R.—a rival of E. D. R., who had also been approached by B. on an earlier occasion—entered the scene. He now left was on the side of E. D. R. and joined him in scolding the unrepentant V. R. R. Within a short time a small crowd gathered at the spot. Some other elders persuaded V. R. R. to apologize to the elders whom he had offended. This he did [illegible] E. D. R., V. P. R. and the other elders [illegible] decided that V. R. R. should give more attention [illegible] at least two hundred rupees every year for [illegible] younger brother's weddings, and after his [illegible] three years give him his share of land and [illegible] V. R. R. agreed to do this and the crowd dispersed.

E. R. is a middle-aged woman, and is counted among the [illegible] of the village. In her day she was regarded [illegible] beauty and was known for a degree of laxity in morals. [illegible] a secret romantic attachment with C. M.—a local [illegible] small-trader. Her husband is meek and docile, and her [illegible] report this affair. This particular case refers to her [illegible] with her son Y., who not only abused her but added to the gravity of the offence by striking her in public. Outwardly the quarrel appeared to be an ordinary, everyday affair, but careful investigation revealed to us that the roots of the trouble lay elsewhere else. The fact of the matter was that E. R. had got her son Y. married to a rather young and immature girl who happened to be her friend's daughter. Y. at this time was a grown-

AW17 Telugu AW17

LIVING TOGETHER

This case is illustrative of some of the internal goings on in the village, and of some of the typical reactions manifested by the people.

K. was an average peasant. He had a son who lived separately in the village on account of his bad relations with his father. K.'s landholdings were modest in size, but some of his fields were quite first class. He was getting old and could not cultivate all the land by himself. Some of his relations came forward to help him, but he rejected their help. At this stage B. N.—an untouchable but influential cultivator—was ingratiating himself with K., and claiming to be his friend and well-wisher. It is said that B. N. persuaded a very influential figure in the village to lend him his helping hand in the pursuit of something which he had in mind. It is rumoured that the influential figure agreed to lend his support in consideration of a substantial monetary gift. After a few days it was known that K. had sold his best fields to B. N. Although the documents showed that B. N. had paid a reasonable price, it was generally believed that the amount which had actually changed hands was very small. K. had not consulted any of his relations about this deal. As if to add insult to injury, the old man had chosen an untouchable for this favour in utter disregard to the claims of his kinsfolk, and after the deal K.'s relations with them broke down completely. He went out to [illegible] some other relations, fell seriously ill and returned to Shamirpet in a very precarious condition. Everyone realized that he was at his end, but his relations did not do anything [illegible] B. N. arranged for him to stay in a room of the village [illegible] and attended with a shopkeeper and a young man of [illegible] care for the supply of rations and for the cooking of his [illegible] In a few days K. died.

[illegible] relations did not show any inclination to touch his corpse. When the headman sent word to them, they said 'We are not [illegible] Did he ever remember us during his lifetime so that [illegible] remember him now? He has his untouchable son who will [illegible] his property. Let him perform the last rites for him.' Hearing this, B. N. said, 'I am an untouchable. I cannot perform the rites. But I shall pay for them, and see that they are done in some style.' He sent for a band from the city, advanced money for necessary preparations, and with the support of the headman secured the co-operation of four clean caste unmarried youths to carry the bier. The relations took it as a challenge. They

I: Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

changed their attitude. One of their spokesmen said, 'The deceased was our seed; and not an untouchable. We may not have riches, but we shall perform his last rites.' They sent for another band, and the last rites were performed in a memorable style. K.'s son felt offended and kept himself away from the ceremonies.

4. Robust and sturdy C. R. has several remarkable traits. Because of his personality and a rather impressive way of speaking he has considerable influence over his community and is looked upon as its leader. He is an untouchable. Some of his acts now and then disgrace his family, and bring about a temporary eclipse of his reputation. Several times he was accused of petty thefts, and once or twice fined by the village council. But when he stole a blanket and some brassware from his employer, and ran away with the wife of a neighbour, the matter was viewed very seriously. People from the village had seen him at a nearby railway station with all the three stolen things—blanket, brassware and the neighbour's wife. The theft was reported to the village council; and after some preliminary consideration the local caste group referred the elopement also to it. In the meantime news was received that C. R. was working in a sugar factory, but was anxious to return to the village. The village council came to the decision that C. R. should compensate his employer to the full value of the articles stolen, return the woman to her husband with a certain sum of money by way of compensation, and pay a fine to the council for the two offences. C. R. returned to the village, accepted the verdict of the council, but asked for a reduction in the amount of the fine. This request was granted.

5. R. was a widow, and after the death of her husband had returned to Shamirpet to live with her mother. She was still young. In a few days she became the mistress of M. who belonged to her caste. They never lived openly as man and wife, but their relationship was well known. M. bought several expensive presents for her, and these included a silver necklace and bracelets. After about three years R. fell in love with an outsider who agreed to take her as his wife. M. did not object to this arrangement, but he insisted on having his presents back. R. was not prepared to part with them. One day when she was passing along the street in front of M.'s house, he ran towards her and started snatching the ornaments by force. R. shouted for help and people rushing to the spot separated them. The matter was reported to the headman,